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SUBJECT: GSE SUPPLIES FOREIGN ERITREANS WITH INCREASED
RATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) rations basic commodities through government-owned stores. Though the majority of Eritreans complain that the rations allowed are not enough to sustain the average family, so-called Beles (Eritreans living abroad who return to Eritrea for the summer months) have reportedly found that their ration limits are greater than those of their resident compatriots. End Summary.

IMPRESSING THE BELES

12. (C) Every summer, hundreds of expatriates--nicknamed Beles after the cactus fruit in season at the same time--return to Eritrea to visit family and friends, smuggle foreign goods in their luggage, and to deliver much needed foreign currency to their relatives. In an attempt to assure the Beles population that Eritrea is truly a land of milk and honey, the GSE has reportedly authorized additional items on ration cards issued to Beles.

13. (C) Ordinarily, ration cards allow Eritreans to purchase commodities such as sugar, coffee, and soybean oil at reduced prices from government-owned grocery stores known as Hidri stores. For instance, a typical ration card allows for sugar to be purchased at 11 nakfas per kilo (\$.33 per pound) rather than 25 nakfas per kilo (\$.75 per pound) from a non-Hidri store. The catch, however, is that non-Hidri stores are not authorized to sell such commodities and often will only sell to individuals that they know (usually friends or family that are looking to purchase beyond what their ration cards provide). Individuals are also limited as to how much of an item they can purchase based on size of household.

TAKE FROM THE LOCALS, GIVE TO THE BELES

14. (C) In his infamous &``aQbQKVQN,]ZKQOTL/H.\YY,QKQPresident Isaias encouraged the Eritrean pop5Iace to show solidarity and not eat bread or pasta. Beles ration cards have an expanded shopping list which includes rice and pasta, items either too expensive or too rare for local Eritreans to procure. Reportedly, Beles form long queues in the morning to purchase their regular allotments of rice and pasta from designated Hidri stores. There are even reports that President Isaias' maid purchases an allotment of four pieces of bread each morning from one of the local Hidri stores.

¶5. (C) Beles ration cards also allow for larger purchases of kerosene. Local Eritrean families are limited to four litres of kerosene per month, while Beles are allowed up to 20 litres per month. The Acting Director General of Energy, Mr. Teklehaimanot, recently informed PolOff that Eritrea currently has such a surplus of kerosene that it can give it to the Beles in Asmara who are not staying with family or friends. Contrarily, local Eritreans report that kerosene and cooking gas (propane) are still hard to come by. One Eritrean also reports that GSE survey workers are now giving households the choice of either a ration of kerosene or a ration of propane rather than the option to purchase both.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Sporadic reports continue to filter in about Eritreans not being able to sustain their livelihoods given the current levels of food supplies. Nonetheless, the GSE continues to hide behind its veil of "self-reliance" by providing expatriates the commodities its local populace cannot afford and attempting to paint Asmara as an oasis of success. Post believes very few, if any, Beles are fooled by this ruse, and dissatisfaction will only increase as conditions worsen. End Comment.
MCMULLEN